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"To want and not to have": Desire and Form in Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse

In her 1922 review of Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction*, Virginia Woolf argued that it was not just in all likelihood "the best book on its subject," but "the only one."[1] Lubbock, Woolf writes, has taken the bold step of attempting to look beyond the distractions inherent in reading "long books about modern life in prose" in order to identify and analyse that which remains after the varied and confused sensations of reading have passed, "something lasting, that we can lay hands on," or in other words "the book itself."[2] For Lubbock, there is little question as to the nature of this enduring element. His primary claim is that the form of a novel, its "proportion and design," is not merely one of its attributes, "but the book itself, as the form of a statue is the statue itself."[3] Form is identical and coterminous with the novel as a whole. While the examples with which Lubbock illustrates his thesis, including the novels of Tolstoy, Flaubert, Thackeray and Balzac, are drawn from the nineteenth-century realist canon, this perspective would also seem to offer a certain amount of interpretative traction for dealing with the modernist novel. Lubbock's insistence, for instance, that the "critical reader" bears a not inconsiderable measure of responsibility for the creation of the work of art, that the novelist is a "craftsman," and his praise for the dramatisation of "the picture of a mind" in Henry James' late novels all resonate with the temper of the modernist period.[4]

Nonetheless, while recognising in the importance of Lubbock's critical and theoretical achievement, Woolf was uncomfortable with elements of his concept of novelistic form. She argued that a novel, the "book itself," is not as Lubbock

[1] Virginia Woolf, "On Re-reading Novels," in *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Twentieth Century and Beyond: From 1900 to World War II*, ed. Joseph Black (Peterborough: Broadview, 2008), 243-7 (244).

[2] Woolf, "On Re-reading Novels," 244, 245.

[3] Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (New York: Scribner, 1921), 27, 24.

[4] Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*, 17, 20, 156.

believed "form which you see, but emotion which you feel."[5] Lubbock's concept of form is, she writes, "interposed between us and the book as we know it," an "alien substance" interfering with "emotions which we feel naturally, and name simply and range in final order by feeling their right relations to each other."[6] This statement has understandably enough led some critics to argue that for Woolf "form is not an object but an emotion."[7] Indeed, in one particularly strong reading Emily Blair has claimed that for Woolf form "like plot, is an imposition that suggests tyranny" and that she is thus more interested in "the arrangement of emotions" than in the structural and hierarchical relationships implied by the term form.[8]

Yet Woolf was clearly concerned with the novel's more traditionally formal properties, the "solid and enduring thing" that expresses emotion.[9] In her review of *The Craft of Fiction* she manifests not only interest in, but also respect for, Lubbock's approach, his insistence that "concentrating on the novelist's method" allows us as readers to "deepen the impression" made by the emotional content of a book.[10] Form and the methods used to achieve it are in fact of primary

[5] Woolf, "On Re-Reading Novels," 245.

[6] Woolf, "On Re-Reading Novels," 245.

[7] Elizabeth A. Flynn, *Feminism Beyond Modernism* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 63.

[8] Emily Blair, *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2007), 68.

[9] Woolf, "On Re-Reading Novels," 245.

[10] Woolf, "On Re-Reading Novels," 246. As this refers to a novel's ability to transmit feeling, some contemporary theorists might prefer the use of the term affect rather than emotion here, seeing it as "crucial" to establish a clear distinction between the two: emotion is the "socio-linguistic fixing" of an experience, while affect is the "intensity" of the experience itself; see Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique* 31 (1995): 83-109 (88). Affect is unnarrated emotion. Other theorists, however, are happy to accept that "emotions are basically synonymous with affects" as long as we acknowledge them as "material, physiological things" that are capable of transmission; see Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 6. Broadly speaking, the use of the term affect tends to emphasise the ability of states of intensity to "pass body to body," to "circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies," and thus operates in contrast to the idea of "solely private emotions"; see Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, "'An Inventory of Shimmers': Affect for Now," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC:

importance. Similarly, in a well-known diary entry written a year after "On Re-reading Novels" Woolf recorded the "great discovery" of her "tunnelling process" which allowed her to "tell the past by instalments" in *Mrs. Dalloway*.[11] Woolf situates this formal or methodological discovery in relation to Lubbock's theory of the novel, indicating if nothing else that his arguments remained relevant to her if only as a point of opposition, for as Woolf goes on to note, her discovery proves "how false Percy Lubbock's doctrine is" regarding the role of premeditation in the creative process.[12] One cannot "do this sort of thing consciously," Woolf writes; instead, one "feels miserable" until one "touches the hidden spring," a spring that is emotional in nature.[13] Steven Monte has argued that this indicates a rejection of the "conscious imposition of order" in favour of "other, presumably emotional, aims" but for Woolf the distinction between the two terms is somewhat arbitrary.[14] Instead, the form of a novel is not a rational and rule-bound product (so many parts "pictorial" manner to so many parts "dramatic," to use Lubbock's terminology) but something that unfolds naturally as a result of emotion.[15] "The novelist's method" Woolf writes, "is simply his device for expressing his emotion."[16] Thus form and emotion are not opposing terms; instead one is the realisation of the other.

In "On Re-reading Novels" Woolf argues that "in writing and in reading it is the emotion that must come first."[17] When Woolf returned to the relationship

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Duke University Press, 2010), 1-25 (1, 8). Affect precedes individuality, while emotion is manifested through it—although this formulation, too, would meet the disapproval of some theorists; see, for example, Miranda Burgess, "On Being Moved: Sympathy, Mobility, and Narrative Form," *Poetics Today* 32.2 (2011): 289-321 (291). While the notion of the permeable interconnectedness of subjects associated with affect correlates with Woolf's theories of selfhood, in this discussion I will be limiting myself to her own terminology and discussing emotion.

[11] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume 2: 1920-1924*, ed. Anne Oliver Bell (London: Hogarth, 1978), 272.

[12] Woolf, *Diary Volume 2*, 272.

[13] Woolf, *Diary Volume 2*, 272.

[14] Steven Monte, "Ancients and Moderns in *Mrs. Dalloway*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61.4 (2000): 587-616 (609).

[15] Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*, 255.

[16] Woolf, "On Re-Reading Novels," 246.

[17] Woolf, "On Re-Reading Novels," 245.

between novelistic form and emotion in her 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own* (though now looking at the question with an eye to the relationship between form and gender) she again asserted the intimate relationship between the two, but approached the problem from the other direction. A novel "is a structure leaving a shape on the mind's eye," a structure Woolf describes in a series of architectural metaphors—"built now in squares, now pagoda shaped, now throwing out wings and arcades, now solidly compact and domed like the Cathedral of Saint Sofia at Constantinople"—which then causes in the reader "the kind of emotion that is appropriate to it."[18] In 1932 Woolf revised an earlier essay, "How Should One Read a Book?" for her second *Common Reader*, and here she again addressed herself to the relationship that exists between the novelist's "attempt to make something as formed and controlled as a building" and "the emotion itself" from which this form springs and which it is ultimately intended to capture and convey.[19] And in 1933 Woolf, writing on the novels of Turgenev, noted that they are "not merely symmetrical, but make us feel [...] intensely" as we respond to their "succession of emotions."[20] Throughout her career, it seems, Woolf saw the relationship between form and emotion as reciprocal, emotion leading to form and form in turn leading to emotion. In this paper, I will be following Woolf's lead and re-examining the structure of what is perhaps both her most clearly formed novel and her most emotional one, *To the Lighthouse*, by examining the connections between its emotional impetus and its formal properties, working, as Woolf recommends, "from the emotion outwards."[21]

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To begin, we must first ask what the primary emotional tone of *To the Lighthouse* is, for it is here that we might expect to find some sort of key to the formal properties of the novel. However, in *A Room of One's Own* Woolf argued

[18] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1989), 71.

[19] Virginia Woolf, "How Should One Read a Book?" in *The Second Common Reader*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego: Harvest, 1986), 259, 260.

[20] Virginia, Woolf, "The Novels of Turgenev," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Volume 6: 1933-1944*, ed. Stuart N. Clarke (London: Hogarth, 2011), 12.

[21] Woolf, "On Re-Reading Novels," 245.

that the emotion from which novelistic "shape" arises does not appear in isolation.[22] Form begins with emotion, but then develops as the novel progresses through the interactions between different characters. This is because the form of a novel is not, like the form of a building, a stable and unchanging system based on "the relation of stone to stone," but a more fluid and unstable structure based on "the relation of human being to human being."[23] When reading *To the Lighthouse*, then, we need to be alert to what might be described, by extending Woolf's own architectural metaphor, as the emotional keystone, but also to the ways this emotion is transformed through the relationship of character to character as the novel progresses.

The opening pages, and indeed the opening lines, of *To the Lighthouse* seem to establish the emotional pattern of the novel as one of dramatic oscillation. "'Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow,' said Mrs. Ramsay. 'But you'll have to be up with the lark,' she added": this is the novel's famous opening sentence, and its grammatical structure of affirmation modified is characteristic of the novel's emotional pattern.[24] Mrs Ramsay's son James responds with a feeling of "extraordinary joy" to his mother's pronouncement; unable to separate "future prospects" from "what is actually at hand," he ignores the conditional aspect of his mother's promise, and endows "the picture of a refrigerator" he is cutting out from a catalogue "with heavenly bliss" (*TTL* 7). The novel's first emotional note of unrestrained joy is then immediately and radically transformed as Mr Ramsay responds to his wife's promise in equally famous, or depending on perspective, infamous, words: "'But,' said his father, stopping in front of the drawing-room window, 'it won't be fine'" (*TTL* 7). James' violent response—"Had there been an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it"—is, the narrator informs us, simply one instance of the "extremes of emotion" that Mr Ramsay elicits from his children (*TTL* 7). But it is also an instance of the novel's primary emotional tone, its characteristic pattern of desire thwarted, which is reflected in the profound shifts of mood that occur throughout the

[22] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 71.

[23] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 71.

[24] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 7. Henceforth *TTL*.

novel. James, for instance, oscillates from joy to murderous rage because he wants so passionately. It is important to note that his desire is intransitive: his frustration arises not from the fact that he will not be visiting the lighthouse tomorrow, except insofar as the lighthouse operates as a floating signifier of desire, but from the very frustration of this desire.

Many of the other characters in *To the Lighthouse* exhibit a similar emotional pattern. Charles Tansley, for instance, is in some ways the novel's "designated scapegoat," a sign of radical otherness that enables a form of group unity to develop around his excluded figure.[25] During his walk with Mrs Ramsay he is ignored in favour of paintings, the view, even the circus, and his moment of "extraordinary pride" as he walks home with "a beautiful woman for the first time in his life" is immediately effaced by Mrs Ramsay's mental characterisation of him as an "odious little man" (*TTL* 15). Despite his best efforts, and Mrs Ramsay's attempts at self-effacement, he remains an elided minor character perpetually unable to satisfy his desire. Yet this simultaneous desire for and inability to achieve respect, status, and perhaps most importantly, the opportunity for self-assertion, to tell "everything about himself," is by no means as unusual as his marginal status might seem to imply (*TTL* 15). In this, if in little else, he is very much like the other characters in the novel. Even a placid character like William Bankes, who seems at times to embody nothing so much as the quiet satisfaction of moderate inclinations, experiences—quietly of course—frustrated desire. Cam will not "'give a flower to the gentleman'" and as a result Bankes feels "aged and saddened" and somehow diminished: "he must have dried and shrunk" (*TTL* 21). Mr Carmichael is an even stronger example of the ubiquity of this pattern. Michael Levenson has noted that Carmichael bears an importance disproportionate to his narrative role due to his participation in the novel's "androgynous turn," and the same can be said with regards to his participation in the novel's emotional structure, for he is consistently portrayed as being precisely without desire, an extremely unusual state in *To the Lighthouse*.[26] His eyes give "no inkling of any inner thoughts or emotions" and he wants "very

[25] Thomas J. Cousineau, *Ritual Unbound: Reading Sacrifice in Modernist Fiction* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 138.

[26] Michael Levenson, *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality: Character and Novelistic Form from Conrad to Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 188.

little of other people" (*TTL* 12, 159). He is, to all appearances, a "creature gorged with existence" and thus free from need (*TTL* 146). Yet ultimately even he is revealed to be, or at least to have been, as wracked with longing as any other character. When he hears of Andrew Ramsay's death in the war, he is said to have "'lost all interest in life'" (*TTL* 159). Nothing has prepared readers for this revelation of love, which strips Carmichael of his impassivity and purported freedom from desire and reveals him to be subject, like all of the other characters in the novel, to the exigencies of want. Instances could be multiplied, revealing how *To the Lighthouse*'s minor characters serve, at least in part, as *ficelles*, fulfilling a specific role. They are not, according to Henry James's definition, "true agents," but merely functional personages within a narrative structure intended to present the central characters more clearly, and one of their tasks here is to establish the emotional tone of the novel, surrounding the central characters with an atmosphere of unsatisfied longing and frustrated desire.[27]

For instance, Mr Ramsay's intellectual endeavours, "his effort to arrive at a perfectly clear understanding of the problem which now engaged the energies of his splendid mind," are stuck at "say, the letter Q"—an abstract representation of his "definite contribution to philosophy" (*TTL* 30, 23). While the narrative certainly mocks Ramsay's intellectual pretensions, his sense of frustrated desire is also clearly acknowledged. As a consequence of this unfulfilled desire, he turns to his wife, viewing her as a sign of "the beauty of the world" which can offer consolation for his professional frustrations (*TTL* 32). Yet he is no more able to satisfy his desire for his wife than for philosophical progress. In the first part of the novel, "The Window," she is alive, yet her presence does not offer Mr Ramsay the relief he needs: "He wanted something—wanted the thing she always found it so difficult to give him; wanted her to tell him that she loved him," and this desire remains largely unsatisfied, despite Mrs Ramsay's unspoken concession, which concludes the section, that "'It's going to be wet tomorrow'" (*TTL* 99-100).[28] In the third part of the novel, "The Lighthouse," her

[27] Henry James, "The Portrait of a Lady," in *The Art of Criticism: Henry James on the Theory and Practice of Fiction*, ed. William Veeder and Susan M. Griffin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 297.

[28] In the first American edition, published simultaneously with the first British edition but containing a number of textual variants, the conclusion of "The Window" may seem to offer a greater level of desire-fulfilment to Mr Ramsay. In the British edition, the

death has left him with a "distraught wild gaze" and an unquenchable Tansleyesque demand for female "self-surrender" and "sympathy" (*TTL* 122). This is of course little more than a poor substitute for the intimacy with his wife which he can now never have, but even this eludes him as Lily Briscoe deflects his demands for sympathy.

Lily herself suffers from a similar inability to satisfy both aesthetic and emotional needs. In her art, she struggles with the "passage from conception to work" in an attempt to "clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast" (*TTL* 19). Even the concluding line of the novel—"Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision"—is by no means a complete resolution of this problem, as the vision in question is at best ephemeral and at worst delusory—her painting is completed "as if she saw it clear for a second," a grammatical structure reminiscent of Mrs Ramsay's conditional promise to James, and one that implies that she has not in fact seen anything clearly (*TTL* 170). Lily's desire for Mrs Ramsay, be it construed as sexual or filial, is no more successful than her aesthetic desire. "What device" is there, she asks herself, "for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored." Her answer is none: "Nothing happened. Nothing! Nothing!" (*TTL* 44). And this is while Mrs Ramsay is alive; like Mr Ramsay, Lily is left bereft by her death.

Finally, Mrs Ramsay, the object of so much unsatisfied desire, the object of the many "eye lines and sight lines" which, according to Laura Marcus, organise the

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conciliatory statement that "she had not said it, but he knew it" is followed, and thus to some extent effaced, by the chapter-ending claim that Mrs Ramsay "had triumphed again" (*TTL* 100). In the American edition, the sentence order is altered and the section concludes with an acknowledgement of non-verbal communication that is both more powerful due to its terminal location and more forcefully structured: "She had not said it: yet he knew"; see Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927), 186. However, the more elaborate claim, made in both editions and reiterated in these varying shortened forms, that "though she had not said a word, he knew, of course he knew, that she loved him" is an instance of free indirect discourse that is heavily focalized through Mrs Ramsay, and cannot be taken as indicating that her husband did in fact know this unspoken truth (*TTL* 100). While it is clear that Mrs Ramsay *wants* him to know it, it is not clear that he does, even in the American edition.

novel, suffers from the same problem.[29] While the world looks at her with longing, she looks with longing at the world. In her case, this is a desire to be loved which is not always achieved. Mr Carmichael, for instance, can resist her appeal, which "injured her" (*TTL* 36). Similarly, although Mrs Ramsay seems able at times to exist in self-sufficient solitude—during her private meditation under the watching eye of the lighthouse, for instance, she feels "It is enough! It is enough!"—she is an inveterate matchmaker, desiring beyond all else to unite other people in matrimony (*TTL* 55). Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle's engagement in "The Window" seems at first a realisation of this desire, but in "The Lighthouse" we learn that "the marriage had turned out rather badly" (*TTL* 142). Nor have Lily and William Bankes married as Mrs Ramsay intended: in fact, her matrimonial projects persistently fail. No character, minor or major, gets what they want in *To the Lighthouse* and this is the emotional impetus from which, according to Woolf's theory, the form of the novel should derive.

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Woolf resisted Lubbock's insistence on placing form at the centre of the novel by placing emotion at the centre of form. If desire, and more particularly unsatisfied desire, is the foundational emotion of *To the Lighthouse*, we might expect to find formal elements of the novel developing from and contributing to this emotional impetus, for as we have seen, in Woolf's estimation, form, or method, is a means of expressing emotion. And this is a novel that is clearly methodic: one early reviewer, for instance, noted disapprovingly in *The Dial* in 1927 that the novel suffers from an "irritating air as of carrying an immense technical burden," while Hermione Lee has more recently and approvingly pointed out that it "insists that you notice its structuring devices."[30]

Perhaps the most obvious formal feature of *To the Lighthouse* is its division into three distinct and named parts, "The Window," "Time Passes," and "The Lighthouse." Of course, critical interpretations of these sections and their role

[29] Laura Marcus, *Virginia Woolf* (Tavistock: Northcote, 2004), 99.

[30] Conrad Aiken, "The Novel as a Work of Art," in *Critical Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Morris Beja (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1985), 15-17 (16); Hermione Lee, introduction to *To the Lighthouse*, by Virginia Woolf (London: Penguin, 2000), xi.

within the larger structure of the novel as a whole vary, but the tripartite structure has generally been associated with questions of temporality. Levenson has argued, for instance, that "time becomes the leading character" of the novel in "Time Passes," and has more recently described the section as disrupting narrative continuity.[31] For David Bradshaw, "Time Passes" acts as a temporal version of the biblical flood which washes away the Victorian and Edwardian past to make room for the "new dispensation" of the final section of the novel.[32] Ann Banfield, on the other hand, sees "The Window" and "The Lighthouse" as instants in time connected by the "continuity" of "Time Passes."[33] In contrast, Tammy Clewell sees "Time Passes" as a structural feature illustrating the very impossibility of linking past and present without fissure or rift; if it is a bridge connecting two times, it is a broken one that represents not a means of communication between the past and the present but the very futility of such an attempt.[34] To reiterate, then, many readings of *To the Lighthouse* view the main structural or formal element of the novel as being related to time, and there is ample theoretical and textual evidence to support these interpretations, even if they are not necessarily in agreement as to exactly how the three parts of the novel represent it. However, Woolf's theory of the relationship between emotion and form indicates that the novel's structure should also be related to its emotional content, and thus to unsatisfied or unsatisfiable desire.

In order to link the tripartite form of *To the Lighthouse* to its emotional impetus, we will need to look first at another, smaller-scale, formal feature of the novel. Throughout "Time Passes" the narrative events of the characters' lives, the very stuff of the traditional novel, are set off from the main body of the text by square brackets. For instance, a lyrical description of the wind's exploration of the Ramsay's empty house is interrupted by this passage: "[Here Mr. Carmichael, who was reading Virgil, blew out his candle. It was past midnight.]" (*TTL* 104).

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[31] Levenson, *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*, 206; Michael Levenson, *Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 235.

[32] David Bradshaw, introduction to *To the Lighthouse*, by Virginia Woolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), xxiii.

[33] Ann Banfield, "Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism, and Cambridge Time," *Poetics Today* 24.1 (2003): 471-516 (502).

[34] Tammy Clewell, "Consolation Refused: Virginia Woolf, The Great War, and Modernist Mourning," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 50.1 (2004): 197-223 (218).

Woolf's tendency to exploit punctuation to its full—for example, her enthusiastic use of semicolons and ellipses, or her use of the dash as a "democratic punctuation mark" offering formal equality between sequential items—and her experience of typesetting for the Hogarth Press, which made her attentive to the physical appearance of the printed word as a material mark on a material page, all indicate the potential importance of these passages.[35]

Critics have, as with so much else in Woolf, interpreted the effect of these bracketed passages in different ways. They can be read as another temporal feature indicating simultaneity of narrative events, "making more than one thing happen at once," but also as a device for creating an "unsettling ambiguity about the status of events."[36] If the death of a main character is relegated to brackets, while pages are spent chronicling the gradual collapse of a house, where does value lie? Others argue that the words inside the brackets become more rather than less important, "framed by the brackets as if by a window."[37] These passages thus seem to both reduce the characters' lives to "parenthetical asides within time's endless monologue," and to paradoxically increase their importance by separating them from the main narrative and framing them within the signifying formal feature of the square bracket.[38] Whether this bracketing reduces or accentuates the importance of the events it contains, or does both simultaneously, it is also a micro-structural reflection of the novel's macro-structure, in which "Time Passes" is framed within the opening and closing

[35] Anna Jackson, *Diary Poetics: Form and Style in Writer's Diaries, 1915-1962* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 118; Panthea Reid, *Art and Affection: A Life of Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 198. These bracketed passages are rather late additions to the text. They appear in neither the holograph draft, written between 30 April 1926 and 25 May 1926, nor in the typescript sent by Woolf to Charles Mauron for translation in late October or November 1926. Their first appearance, in a form that is quite close to that of the first editions, is in the proofs sent to R. & R. Clarke of Edinburgh, who printed for the Hogarth Press. In these proofs, Woolf has changed the more common, and thus less obtrusive, round brackets for square brackets, a decision which highlights the way these additions to the text operate on a separate narrative plain from the bulk of "Time Passes"; see Julia Briggs. "Genetic Edition," *Woolf Online: An Electronic Edition and Commentary on Virginia Woolf's "Time Passes"*: http://www.woolfonline.com/?q=genetic_edition/overview; accessed 5 September 2013.

[36] Lee, introduction to *To the Lighthouse*, x.

[37] Marcus, *Virginia Woolf*, 105.

[38] Levenson, *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*, 171.

brackets of "The Window" and "The Lighthouse." The bracketed sections contain miniature narratives of loss extending from the night ending "The Window," when Mr Carmichael blows out his candle, to the evening beginning "The Lighthouse" when he and Lily return years later to the house on Skye. Between these narrative events the decimation of the Ramsay family is recorded: Mrs Ramsay dies, Prue Ramsay marries and then dies, Andrew Ramsay is blown up by a shell on a First World War battlefield, and all of this occurs within the formal framing device of two square brackets.

The novel is thus structured as a series of frames surrounding moments of loss, moments when desire is figured as extending literally towards nothing, as being ultimately unsatisfiable. Perhaps the clearest indication of this is the bracketed reporting of Mrs Ramsay's death: "[Mr. Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before he stretched his arms out. They remained empty.]" (*TTL* 105). The fractured syntax and insistent repetition of this passage highlights the intransitive nature of Mr Ramsay's desire. His arms are stretched out towards the emptiness where his wife has been, a sign of desire functioning in the absence of its proper object.[39]

These passages in "Time Passes" should be read, however, in relation to the final section of the novel, "The Lighthouse," which consists of alternating or juxtaposed scenes of Mr Ramsay, Cam and James sailing to the lighthouse and scenes of Lily and Mr Carmichael at the Ramsay house. Part five ends with a scene of extraordinary emotional intensity depicting Lily's desire:

[39] While the American edition offers a more syntactically conventional version of this passage—"[Mr Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty]"—the 1930 Uniform Edition is, as Julia Briggs has pointed out, closer to the British version, with commas added after "but" and "before"; see Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927), 194; and Julia Briggs, "Between the Texts: Virginia Woolf's Acts of Revision," in *Text: An Interdisciplinary Annual of Textual Studies,* vol. 12 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 143-65 (153). These textual variants do not, however, affect a reading of the passage as indicating desire directed towards a missing object.

> For one moment she felt that if they both got up, here, now on the lawn, and demanded an explanation, why was it so short, why was it so inexplicable, [...] then, beauty would roll itself up; the space would fill; those empty flourishes would form into shape; if they shouted loud enough Mrs. Ramsay would return. "Mrs. Ramsay!" she said aloud, "Mrs. Ramsay!" The tears ran down her face. (*TTL* 147-48)

This is a clear example of the novel's primary emotional tone of unfulfilled and unfulfillable desire. It is both a straightforward emotional appeal and a form of bitter irony: no matter how insistent one's demands, one cannot realistically hope for an explanation from the indifferent universe revealed in "Time Passes." Lily, like all of the other characters in *To the Lighthouse*, is condemned "to want and not to have [...] and then to want and not to have—to want and want" (*TTL* 146). This passage also adumbrates the formal properties of grief. Earlier in part five, Lily is struck by the way the absent Mrs Ramsay, "ghost, air, nothingness," can suddenly exert enormous emotional demands: "Suddenly the empty drawing-room steps, the frill of the chair inside, the puppy tumbling on the terrace, the whole wave and whisper of the garden became like curves and arabesques flourishing round a centre of complete emptiness" (*TTL* 146). This centre of emptiness is the emotional and thus formal heart of *To the Lighthouse*. When Lily demands an explanation in the hope that "the space would fill" and that "those empty flourishes would form into shape" she is speaking to the void at the heart of life, the empty place of hopeless desire, but she is also demanding that life itself, "those empty flourishes" take on the rigidity and structure of art, and in so doing if not fill the empty void which they surround, at least contain it (*TTL* 148).

This powerful appeal ends section five of "The Lighthouse." Section six consists of two bracketed sentences: "[Macalister's boy took one of the fish and cut a square out of its side to bait his hook with. The mutilated body (it was alive still) was thrown back into the sea.]" (*TTL* 148). Section seven then begins with a return to Lily's anguished cries of longing for Mrs Ramsay. The brief bracketed sentences of section six are in many ways central to *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf noted in her diary that the centre of the novel was "father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting we perished, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel," and while the image underwent considerable transformation, it remains extremely

important.[40] It offers on one level an extraordinary counterpoint to the highly emotional ending of section five and beginning of section seven, balancing what has been described as the novel's "tendency to sentimentality and subjectivism."[41] The saccharine sweetness and intense emotional insistence on the value of the human subject meet here their blank obverse, a cold and unsentimental rendering of thoughtless, indifferent cruelty. Kim Shirkhani has recently argued that this use of brackets is an example of the type of "understatement" which heightens "the shocking effect of violent images by a contrast with their subordination on the grammatical level."[42] This is consonant with readings that see the bracketed passages in *To the Lighthouse* as tending to create ambiguity in the moral status of events. The bracketing of this scene also creates a formal parallel between the emotionally significant but bracketed deaths of the narrative's central characters, including the universally beloved Mrs Ramsay, and the bracketed but emotionally insignificant mutilation of a fish for which, of course, no one mourns.[43] Seen in this light, human death and human longing, no matter how subjectively central, are of no objective importance. Further, this bracketed scene replicates the formal structure of the book as a whole on a local scale. "The Window" and "The Lighthouse" bracket the relative emptiness and vacancy of "Time Passes." In this section, square brackets surround moments of human loss and longing; a square is cut out of a fish, leaving a vacancy in its middle as it is thrown back into the sea. This returns

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[40] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume 3: 1925-1930*, ed. Anne Oliver Bell (London: Hogarth, 1980), 18-19.

[41] Pamela L. Caughie, "Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism: Returning to the Lighthouse," in *Rereading the New: A Backward Glance at Modernism*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 297-323 (315).

[42] Kim Shirkhani, "Small Language and Big Men in Virginia Woolf," *Studies in the Novel* 43.1 (2011): 55-74 (63).

[43] This section of *To the Lighthouse* would bear contrast with the nineteenth section of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, which famously consists of a single sentence: "My mother is a fish"; see William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (New York: Random House, 1964), 79. If, however, one accepts the idea that Vardamn's assertion represents a triumph of figurative language over death—his mother "is not dead but is a part of him now, and a part of everyone else she knew"—then these passages are operating in very different ways within their novels' respective economies of meaning; see Joseph R. Urgo, "William Faulkner and the Drama of Meaning: The Discovery of the Figurative in 'As I Lay Dying'," *South Atlantic Review* 53.2 (1988): 11-23 (20).

us to the novel's larger structure of scenes of life and longing arranged around lacunae or gaps.

♦

The emptiness at the heart of the novel also lies at the heart of the novel's characters. As I have argued, the novel's emotional tone is established by both the minor and major characters' persistent longing for the unachievable and unattainable. Mrs Ramsay is the centre of this longing, sought after by both Lily and her husband. Lily desires not "knowledge" of Mrs Ramsay, but "unity" with her, but realises that this is impossible: other people remain "sealed," metaphoric "hives" whose interiority remains inaccessible (*TTL* 44). This is another instance of the sort of unsatisfied desire that shapes the novel. *To the Lighthouse* also indicates, however, that "the dome-shaped hive" of self may be not a private receptacle of subjective plenitude which is sadly inaccessible to other people, but yet another empty centre (*TTL* 44). When Mrs Ramsay is briefly alone in the midst of the busy day depicted in "The Window," she undergoes a strange transformation: "All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others" (*TTL* 52). But this transformation is paradoxically to become "not as oneself," "losing personality" to become "a wedge of darkness" (*TTL* 53). This core of darkness initially seems to be related to permanence, stability, privacy, and authenticity, implying that this may be the 'real' self that Lily seeks inside the privacy of Mrs Ramsay's being, a real self that underlies the more superficial socially-conditioned elements of subjectivity. This is a loosening of "the bonds of habit and of social custom that tie consciousness to the visible, sensate world" and thus a freeing of the true, if admittedly mysterious, self from artificial constraint.[44] On the other hand, this image has been seen by some critics as a "disintegration of identity" or "an absence."[45] Any version of selfhood that is, as Marcus has pointed out, "so

[44] Maria DiBattista, *Imagining Virginia Woolf: An Experiment in Critical Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 149.

[45] Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1989), 17; Jane de Gay, *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 108.

radically at odds with" the more quotidian "social and familial self" can appear to be no more than "a negation of identity."[46] Beneath the superficial social attachments, "the things you know us by," Mrs Ramsay reflects, "it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep" (*TTL* 53). However one chooses to read these passages, *To the Lighthouse* certainly offers a vision of the self that gestures generously towards the not-self. Once again the larger emotional and formal structure of the novel seems to be mirrored in more local elements: self in the novel is an absence bracketed by presence, an absence that simultaneously attracts and repels the longing so characteristic of the novel's emotional texture.

♦

To the Lighthouse offers two parallel visions of the world and of the self. There is the world of "The Window" and "The Lighthouse," the world of desire and longing, the world of inevitably insufficient relationships. This is the world of Lily and her hopeless desire to be one with Mrs Ramsay, the world of Mr Ramsay and his overwhelming need to "be taken within the circle of life" (*TTL* 33). And then there is the world of "Time Passes," a world of "immense darkness" in which only the barest markers of human life, a "hand raised as if to clutch something," exist (*TTL* 103). This is the world in which "night [...] succeeds to night" to the dissolution of all things, a night in which human meaning refuses to reside and "it is useless [...] to ask those questions as to what, and why, and wherefore" (*TTL* 104, 105). This is the world "eyeless, and thus terrible," an eye which is homologous with an I, a perceiving self (*TTL* 110). It is without doubt a beautiful world—both in terms of representation and language—for this section contains some of Woolf's finest prose, but its beauty is "a form from which life had parted" (*TTL* 106). One way of conceptualising these two visions is to see "The Window" and "The Lighthouse" as an expression of the desire which is the inevitable accompaniment to human life, and "Time Passes" as the vacancy around which that desire circulates.

For some readers of *To the Lighthouse*, Lily's completion of her painting at the end of the novel with a single brushstroke acts as gesture of separation: "with a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the

[46] Marcus, *Virginia Woolf*, 100.

centre" (*TTL* 170). This line can be viewed as analogous to the lighthouse itself, or in more formal terms to "Time Passes," a structural feature of an artistic totality which marks a division, for some between an inassimilable past and an irredeemable present, for others between pre- and post-modernist moments.[47] Woolf herself, however, conceived of "Time Passes" as a "corridor" linking the two parts of the novel, not separating them.[48] The same point can be made with reference to Lily's final line: rather than separating, it can be seen as unifying or linking the novel's two visions of the world.[49]

It is important to textually frame this famous brushstroke: immediately before Lily completes her painting she is joined by Mr Carmichael. "He stood there," Lily thinks, "spreading his hands over all the weakness and suffering of mankind [...] surveying, tolerantly, compassionately, their final destiny" (*TTL* 169). Lily interprets Carmichael's gesture as a blessing—and Carmichael has acted before as a surrogate priest, blessing Mrs Ramsay's dinner party in "The Window"—and when he lowers his hands as if letting fall "a wreath of violets and asphodels" it is clearly a funereal gesture, a benediction for the dead, who in *The Odyssey* inhabit a meadow of asphodel (*TTL* 170). Lily's own painterly gesture, the drawing of a central line, is thus linked with, indeed inspired by, an act of benediction; it is both a gesture of separation—for the dead are gone—and of reuniting, a connection between the two worlds of the novel, that of the living and that of the dead, between the world outside the brackets and the world inside, between desire and striving and longing and the strange emptiness that perpetually frustrates them.[50]

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[47] Clewell, "Consolation Refused," 218; Mark Gaipa, "An Agnostic's Daughter's Apology: Materialism, Spiritualism, and Ancestry in Woolf's To the Lighthouse," *Journal of Modern Literature* 26.2 (2003): 1-41 (14).

[48] Virginia Woof, *To the Lighthouse: The Original Holograph Draft*, ed. Susan Dick (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 48.

[49] Bradshaw has pointed out just how amenable to multiple interpretations this line is, arguing that to identify it "too restrictively" with one pattern of signification would be to "read against the grain" of the novel; David Bradshaw, introduction to *To the Lighthouse*, xxxviii.

[50] Woolf acknowledged in a letter to Roger Fry that this line was both formal and emotional in nature, but refused to identify exactly what its particular emotional charge might be: "One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feeling would accrue to this, but I refused to think them

The novel's conclusion is thus at once a formal gesture linking its component parts, and a sign of emotional completion or reconciliation, an acceptance of the fact that longing remains unfulfilled, but that nonetheless endless desire need not be the ruling emotion of life. This can be best seen, perhaps, by looking not at Lily's relationship with Mrs Ramsay, which has so often been the focus of critical attention, but at her relationship with Mr Carmichael. Thinking about him in "The Lighthouse," reflecting on the number of different roles he plays in her life, Lily acknowledges "how many shapes one person might wear" (*TTL* 159). Just as she has in the past with Mrs Ramsay, she begins to speculate about his interiority, but this process is interrupted when she realises that "this was one way of knowing people [...] to know the outline, not the detail" (*TTL* 159). While Carmichael may possess an interior, it is not necessary for Lily to know it. He is neither an overpowering absence, nor a marker of the futility of human relationships. Instead, Lily realises that it is possible "to sit in one's garden and look at the slopes of a hill running purple down into the distant heather," to "know him in that way" (*TTL* 159). And again at the end of the novel, Lily realises that "she had been right" about Carmichael, that "they had not needed to speak" (*TTL* 169). Lily is here accepting a minimally detailed, distanced and aestheticized characterisation as a means of "knowing" other selves, and *To the Lighthouse* as a whole seems to endorse her acceptance. This sort of characterisation is offered as a way of bridging the gaps between people without circling in eternal frustration around an always unknowable other. Similarly, this way of knowing rejects the unfulfillable longing which I have argued is the impetus for the novel's form. In its place is a simple acceptance, a resigned reconciliation to the realities of a world in which death and absence are universal truths. While writing *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf wrote in "On Being Ill" of how "it is only the recumbent," the ill, "who know what, after all, Nature is at no

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out, and trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions—which they have done"; see Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume Three, 1923-1928,* ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1977), 385. As Justyna Kostkowska has recently pointed out, Woolf is here testifying to her faith in one of the "major principles of Post-Impressionist art: the ability of form to produce emotion in the audience"; see Justyna Kostkowska, "*Studland Beach* and *Jacob's Room*: Vanessa Bell's and Virginia Woolf's Experiments in Portrait Making 1910-1922," *Partial Answers* 9.1 (2011): 79-93 (91).

pains to conceal—that she in the end will conquer."[51] Death and loss are the natural and inevitable corollaries of any human life, and it is this reality and Woolf's reaction to it that shape the form of *To the Lighthouse*.

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[51] Virginia Woolf, "On Being Ill," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Volume 4: 1925-1928*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1984), 322.